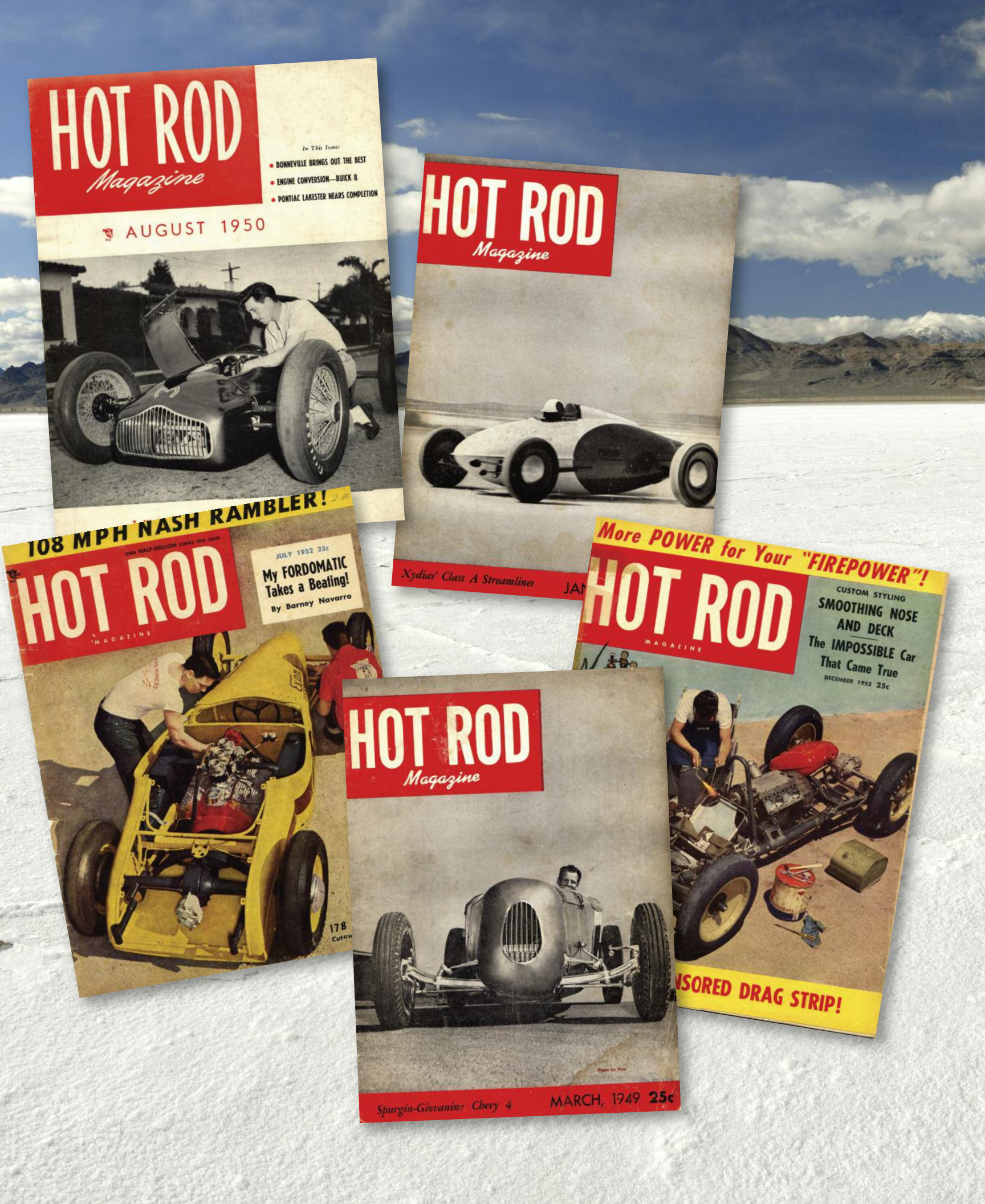
HOT ROD
Magazine
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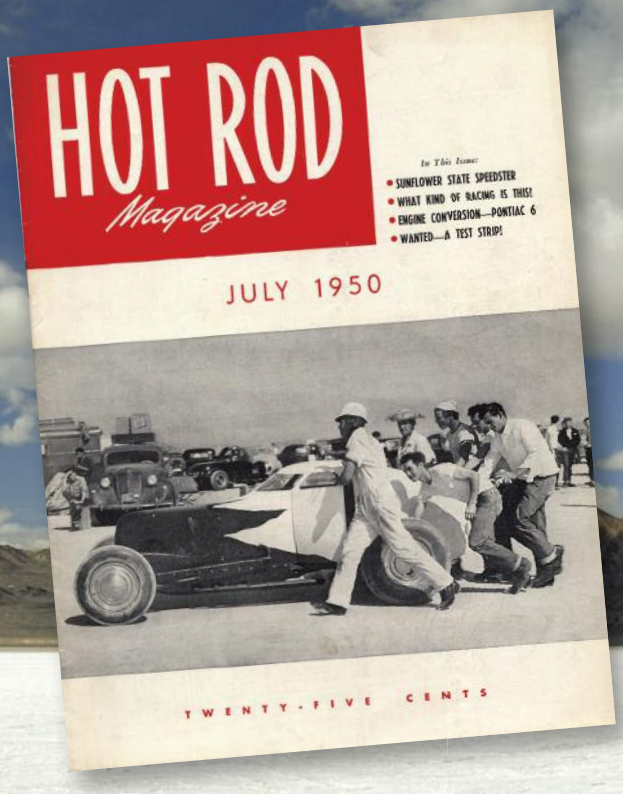


BONNEVILLE BOUND

Historic Hot Rod Racers: From the Dry Lakes to the Salt Flats

By Ken Gross

Hot rods have always been about competition. From the 1920s, when mechanically minded young men first began stripping down old cars and souping up engines with extra carburetors, higher compression, reground camshafts and improved ignition, they couldn't wait to see how fast their home-built racers could go. Usually Model T Fords, these modifieds were initially called "hop ups" or "gow jobs." Eventually they became known as "hot rods," but no one knows the origin of that now-universal term. (It may be a contraction of "hot roadster.")

At first, there were no official races for hot rods. Owners raced one another informally, usually at night, on the streets and highways of Los Angeles and other cities across the country. Crowds gathered to watch and place bets on the contestants. Illegal and very dangerous, street racing often resulted in accidents and fatalities. These clandestine speed contests aroused the ire of the police, the news media and ordinary citizens.

Something had to give.

In 1937, the Southern California Timing Association (SCTA) was formed, and dozens of organized hot rod clubs in Southern California banded together under the SCTA's auspices to improve the image of hot rodding and to compete legitimately (and more safely) against one another. A deserted network of flat, expansive dry lake beds, located

The Eddie Miller Streamliner, the So-Cal Speed Shop Streamliner, the Spade Carillo Ford Roadster, the Spurgin-Giovanine Chevrolet Roadster, the Chet Herbert "Beast III" Streamliner and the Ralph Schenck Streamliner all appeared on the cover of *Hot Rod Magazine*, and all are here today on the 18th fairway of Pebble Beach Golf Links.

The Dodge Hemi-powered Williams Brothers Ford Roadster was timed at 159.57 mph at Bonneville in 1954. After spending nearly a half-century hidden away in storage, it's been carefully preserved and refurbished to running condition.

in the Mojave High Desert, about 2,800 feet above sea level, well to the North and East of LA, provided the perfect natural racetrack.

The lake surface was made up of alkali-laced, hard-packed dirt. Several locations soon became household words in the burgeoning hot rod community. Known as El Mirage, Muroc, and Harper's (to name a few), the dry lakebeds were dusty and susceptible to high winds. It took several hours for dedicated racers to wend their way up from the outskirts of Los Angeles to the open, largely deserted areas that were suitable for racing.

Typically, hot rodders left immediately after their work ended on a Friday night, arriving at the lakes in time for a few hours rest. Most competitors drove or towed their cars; trailered race cars were rare. In the beginning, a hot rodder's race car was most often his street roadster. Once they arrived at the lakes, cars were stripped of headlights, fenders, tops, windshields and other superfluous parts. Engines were tuned-up, and if the wind wasn't too strong, forcing a cancellation, the hot rodders enthusiastically raced one another across the lake surface. Initially the SCTA only allowed open two-seater roadsters to race; coupes and sedans were not permitted.

In the early days, several cars would race simultaneously, side by side, across the lakebed in a straight line, but spinning wheels and high winds produced swirling dust clouds that made this type of competition very dangerous for all except the leading car. With their drivers unable to see, the speeding hot rods would occasionally hit one another. As initially primitive timing gear evolved and top speeds rose, the SCTA and several competing organizations like the Russetta, Cal-Neva and Bell Timing Associations, laid out specific straight-line courses, marking the start and finish lines, as well as acceleration and run off/braking areas, and the drivers competed individually, one at a time. Although this sometimes meant the racers had to wait hours for each timed run, it was noticeably safer. In 1940, Bob Rufi's elongated egg-shaped streamliner and the slender streamlined coupe of Ralph Schenck, both Chevy-4 powered, were among the fastest, purpose-built cars. Rufi's 140+ mph top speed record wasn't broken until after the war.

World War II interrupted hot rod racing at the lakes (Muroc became the location for Edwards Air Force Base), but the

One of the original "Tankers," the So-Cal Tank was built by Alex Xydias, owner of the So-Cal Speed Shop, using a 315-gallon fuel tank from a World War II Lockheed P-38 Lightning fighter plane.

The Chet Herbert "Beast III" Streamliner was the fastest single-engine car in America in 1952, having been timed at Bonneville at a then-incredible 238.095 mph

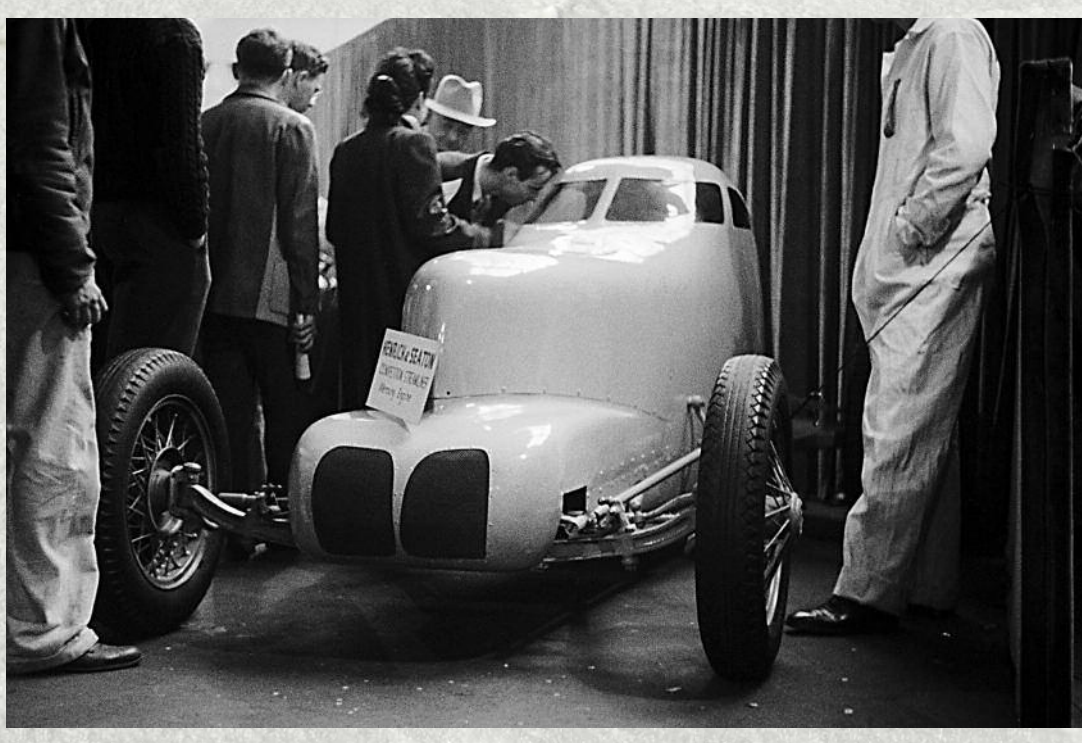
racing resumed with gusto as soon as hostilities ceased. The number of interested young men, many with service-honed mechanical skills, had increased exponentially, and they flocked to the lakes with their modified cars. Classes were established for stripped-down street roadsters, but it soon became evident that higher speeds required more specialized cars. And higher speeds were what most hot rodders sought. The SCTA initially divided competing cars into open Roadsters (essentially with production bodies, although they could be modified) and Streamliners, with four different engine classes based upon displacement. Use of a supercharger or overhead camshafts moved the competitor to the next highest class.

In 1949, SCTA classes were divided into stock-bodied and modified roadsters, the latter always with open wheels, channeled bodies and soon, full belly pans and more streamlined track-style noses. Although hot rodders loved the traditional 1932 Ford, the airworthiness of its barn door silhouette benefited only so much from body modifications. The fastest modified production-bodied cars at the lakes were channeled, low-slung mid-1920s Model T and Chevrolet roadsters. Streamlined cars with exposed wheels raced in the Lakester Class. Fully enclosed racers with wind-cheating, envelope bodies were classified as Streamliners.

Hot rodders who had worked for aircraft manufacturers, or served in aviation branches, had a rudimentary knowledge of streamlining.

Enterprising racers, like brothers Tom and Bill Spalding, Dean Batchelor and Alex Xydias, were among the first to build fully streamlined cars. They were influenced by aircraft manuals, and by prewar British and German high-speed racers. The late Dean Batchelor, whose name is on the trophy awarded to the most significant Hot Rod here at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance, drove the Ford V-8/60-powered So-Cal Speed Shop Streamliner at El Mirage. A high-speed crash, which he survived, ended his driving career, but he went on to become a distinguished author (having written *The American Hot Rod*) and the Editor of *Road & Track* magazine.

Meanwhile, Bill Burke, a former Navy PT boat chief mechanic, was fascinated with the 165-gallon and 315-gallon fuel tanks



The 1940 Ralph Schenck Streamliner made its debut on the speed scene at the Harper Dry Lake and achieved a top speed of 118.57 mph. Its design is reminiscent of the Golden Submarine racer of Harry Miller.

that had been designed to allow fighter aircraft to reach distant targets like Berlin or Tokyo. The tanks were slung beneath the wings or the belly of the aircraft. After reaching the target, the empty fuel tank was jettisoned, and the plane was ready for combat. Readily available after the war, these tanks symbolized hot rodding's ingenuity and adaptability at its best. Burke built the first "belly tank" racer using the smaller-sized tank and mounting a lusty Ford Flathead engine in front of the driver. On his second try, Burke used the larger tank and worked with engine wizard Don Francisco to mount the engine fully enclosed behind the driver, and he immediately began setting records. Over time, Alex Xydias' So-Cal Speed Shop belly tank hit nearly 200 mph; its teardrop shape was the perfect way to cheat the wind. A number of hot rodders followed suit.

The SCTA authorized and expanded classes for Roadsters, Lakesters (streamlined bodies without fenders) and Streamliners (fully enclosed streamlined bodies). The Russetta Timing Association (RTA) permitted coupes and sedans. After Don Brown and the Pierson Brothers set impressively fast Russetta-clocked times in their coupes, the SCTA stalwarts reneged, let them run, and were surprised to see just how quick a modified hardtop could go.

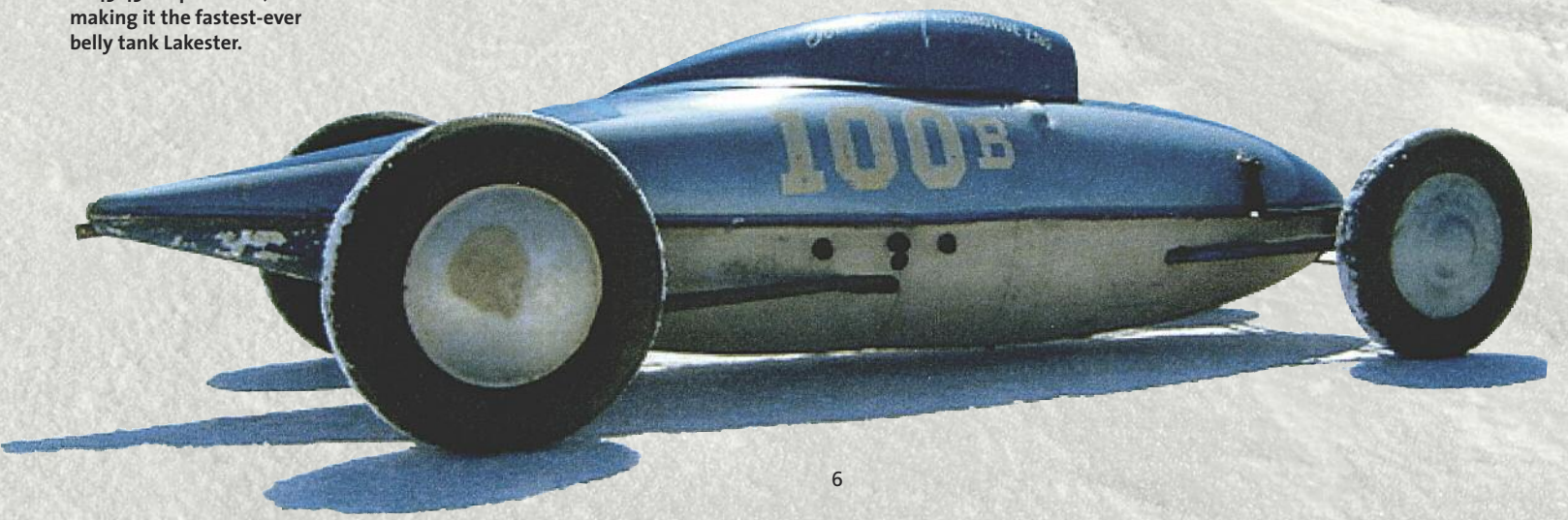
By 1949, the fastest lakes racers could top 200 mph and they would literally run out of space on most lake courses. The Bonneville Salt Flats, located near Salt Lake City, constituted a boundless salt tract, with up to thirteen miles of usable hard-packed surface, which permitted much higher speeds. Earlier, in 1935, Britain's Sir Malcolm Campbell notched a record two-way average of 301.129 mph there. Looking for more space to run, *Hot Rod Magazine*'s founder, Robert E. Petersen, the SCTA and the fledgling National Hot Rod Association (NHRA), with Wally Parks in charge, first arranged to race on "the salt" in August of 1949.

Some 47 competitors, all but two from Los Angeles, made the long trek to Utah, fired up their engines and began setting records. Rigid safety rules were imposed, as many cars consistently topped 200 mph. Sleek high-speed racing machines, like the Kenz & Leslie Streamliner, Mal Hooper and Ray Brown's Shadoff Special, Alex Xydias' So-Cal Speed Shop Streamliner, and a series of innovative "Beast" streamliners run by talented cam grinder Chet Herbert, kept upping the ante and raising speed records. Membership in the new and still highly respected 200-Miles-Per-Hour Club accorded each recipient a good deal of respect and admiration.

The SCTA modified its classes to reflect International FIA requirements, and skeptical Europeans were astonished to witness so-called backyard American efforts shattering world-recognized top speed records. Every year, in August and October, hot rodders still converge on the Bonneville Salt Flats with their hot rods and motorcycles, painstakingly inching up speed marks once believed to be invincible. And the SCTA still runs the show.

Historic hot rods have made periodic—and popular—appearances at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance since 1973, and this year's crop of famous racing rods is certain to delight the crowd. Hot rods like these exemplify American ingenuity, mechanical skills, adaptability and sheer courage.

Former Director of the Petersen Automotive Museum and a longtime hot rodder, Ken Gross helped bring Hot Rods to the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance. He is a member of the Concours Selection Committee.



Another Belly Tank creation from 1951, the Oldsmobile-powered Tom Beatty single-seater is now owned by the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. In 1962, at Bonneville, it set a 243.438-mph record, making it the fastest-ever belly tank Lakester.